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ABSTRACT

The emotional needs of gifted children are seldom considered by psychologists either during their training or in their subsequent professional practices. Most psychology trainees appear to be exposed only to the Terman (1925) studies which concluded that gifted children have significantly fewer social and emotional problems than does the general population. Experimental flaws in the Terman studies, and recent data concerning relationships between giftedness and depression, peer and sibling problems, suicide, underachievement, and delinquency suggest that psychologists need to direct more attention toward problems of the gifted. Unfortunately, the lack of emphasis within psychology concerning gifted children reflects a similar neglect in society at large. Only one-half of the gifted children in the United States have been identified and only one-third of these are served by special school programs. A program to counsel parents of gifted children was developed which focuses on identification; motivation; discipline; peer, sibling, and parent relationships; stress management; depression; tradition-breaking; and communication of feelings. The counseling program appears to have been therapeutic and effective in changing parenting perceptions and behaviors and in promoting insight into gifted children's perceptions. (NB)

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PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING WITH FAMILIES OF GIFTED CHILDREN

IN SYMPOSIUM, "PRESERVING PROMISE: UNRECOGNIZED PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF GIFTED AND TALENTED INDIVIDUALS" (J. WEBB, CHAIR)

PRESENTED AT THE

92ND ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Psychological Counseling
with Families of Gifted Children

Of all the helping professions, one would assume that clinical, counseling and school psychologists would be particularly sensitive to issues about gifted children, and prepared to provide professional assistance to gifted children and their families. In fact, however, such does not appear to be the case. The emotional needs of gifted children are seldom considered either during the training of psychologists or in their subsequent professional practice.

It appears that most psychologists during their training are exposed only to the Terman studies, with the conclusion being drawn from these studies that gifted children have significantly fewer social and emotional problems than people in general, and that there are no special emotional problems to be faced as a result of their high intelligence. Such training of psychologists promulgates a myth - namely, that gifted children don't need any special help, and that they can make it on their own.

In their training, few psychologists are made aware that "gifted" is defined generally as the upper 3% (IQ of 130 and above) and that, this percentage figure equals the percent classified as mentally retarded - a population about which they are much more likely to receive training. Even fewer psychologists are made aware of different "types" of gifted individuals, and are unaware either of experimental flaws in Terman's study (Terman, 1925) or of recent data concerning relationships between giftedness and depression, peer and sibling problems, suicide, underachievement and delinquency (Lajole & Shore, 1981; Lester & Lester, 1971; Lipper, 1979; Seeley, 1982; Webb, 1983). Instead the Terman studies are presented as a model of longitudinal research - which indeed they are.

The children selected for the Terman study had several sampling biases. Almost all were 3rd and 4th grade Caucasians from California who were selected initially based on teacher nomination, scores above 130 on group administered intelligence/achievement tests, or because they were the youngest in the class. If they passed the initial screening, they were then given an individual intelligence test and

were included if they scored an IQ of 140 or above.

What kinds of children are likely to be nominated by their teacher and to do well on group tests? Those who are well socialized emotionally stable, and willing to conform to the system. This selectivity screens out maladjusted children along with those who are gifted in unique or creative ways that don't fit the system. Additionally, recent research (Jacobs, 1971; Marland, 1972) indicates that 50% of gifted children fail to be identified by teacher nomination or by group tests. Probably these overlooked gifted children are the "right-brained" ones (Kane & Kane, 1979).

In addition, Terman counseled the children and their families, following them with great interest over the years - and undoubtedly with therapeutic benefit. Even so, long-term follow-up indicated that about 20% of "Termanites" had clear emotional problems (Coleman, 1980).

The lack of emphasis within psychology concerning gifted children only mirrors a similar neglect in our society. Only half of the gifted children in our country have been identified as such, and only one-third of these are being served by special school programs (Lyons, 1981). Only one comprehensive survey of school programs for gifted has been done (Marland, 1972), and in that survey almost 60% of school administrators believed that they had no gifted students in their school district. In 1979 over $1,000 of federal money was spent for each learning disabled child in the U.S.; only $2.42 for each gifted child (Lipper, 1979). Since then the U.S. Office of Gifted and Talented was disestablished in 1981. No such office exists at this time, and no federal monies are earmarked for this upper 3% of the intellectual population. In our entire federal government it appears that there is no office, section or person charged with looking out after, providing information about, or coordinating efforts concerning our gifted and talented children. There even seems to be an underlying belief that somehow it is "elitist" and "unfair" to have special programs for gifted children, and that if we did so we would be taking a specially favored few and giving them more even though they might need help to reach their potential, and even though great personal and social misery would likely occur if they are not provided resources and guidance.

Three years ago a program was initiated at Wright State University's School of Professional Psychology to counsel parents of gifted children. This program focuses on the impact of such a child on the family. Ten particular areas are addressed. These are:

Identification
Motivation
Discipline
Peer relationships
Sibling relationships
Stress management
Depression
Tradition-breaking
Communication of feelings
Parent relationships

Each of these areas are common ones for psychological involvement, but are given a particular twist when placed in the context of a gifted child. From our parent groups, it quickly became clear not only that parents lacked sufficient information and understanding, but also that often schools were part of the problem rather than part of the solution. The stresses of being a child in the upper 3% trying to make it in a school system designed for the other 97% - and where you were being "mainstreamed" - were great, in addition to the pressures toward conformity from peers and siblings. In our guidance program, parents meet in a 10 week series for semi-structured discussion groups. Although these are not therapy groups, per se, the group leaders must be well trained in group dynamics in order to prevent the group from becoming a therapy or encounter group. These parents are intense and frustrated.

We have now conducted eight such 10-week counseling series on a fee-for-service basis. Evaluations by the parents, as well as our own observations and reported beavhior changes, strongly suggest that these groups are therapeutic and effective in changing parenting perceptions and behaviors, and that they promote insight into gifted children's perceptions. In addition they help parents anticipate, eliminate, and ameliorate some of the particular problems of gifted children within their family, and result in clear behavior changes in the child both at home and at school. Parents are then able to

communicate this information to the schools, and to jointly develop modifications in the school day to better meet the child's needs.

In addition to our guided discussion groups, we have a thriving business providing assessments of suspected gifted children, as well as individual and family psychotherapy when needed. Often we find ourselves providing second opinions; or the parents seek us out because the school system has told them that the school psychologists cannot see them for several months, if at all, because they must see handicapped children under PL 94-142.

We let our parents seek us out based on their own judgment, and based on public information about gifted children. Our experience indicates that it is a myth that "every parent has a gifted child." We are finding that parents tend to be quite conservative, and virtually always underestimate their child's intelligence. They usually will say "My child's bright, but he's not gifted," and will express some slight embarrassment about bringing the child in for testing.

The fact that our program has grown attests to the felt need by parents, and lately by school systems, to obtain psychological services of assessment, counseling and therapy. This need appears national in scope. In 1981 I appeared on the Phil Donahue Show, along with Joyce Juntune of the National Association for Gifted Children, and others, talking about depression, suicide, and other emotional problems and needs of gifted children. Letters from over 20,000 persons nationwide confirmed the extent of neglect, the prevailing myths, and the general lack of professional understanding or help.

What I am saying, fellow colleagues, is that there is a noteable area of professional practice representing a genuine need that we are not yet sufficiently addressing. The families who have children in the upper 3% intellectually - and particularly those in the upper 1% - need your professional help. Gifted children experienc problems in living that often require intervention,and family members experience stress because of the presence of a gifted child.

As some of you noted in the February edition of the APA Monitor, at Wright State University we are compiling a national listing of psychologists who are interested in working professionally with gifted children and their families. This project is being undertaken jointly with the National Association for Gifted Children, the Association for the Gifted of the Council for Exceptional Children, and the American Association for Gifted Children. Copies of the listing will be given to these groups since they very frequently receive calls from parents and teachers seeking help for gifted children.

If you have interest in expanding your practice or research to include gifted children, I urge you to contact me at Wright State University wo that we can add you to our register. For readings or additional infomration, please contact any of us on this panel.

Clinical services are not the only area of neglect for our gifted children. The research needs are enormous. I am pleased to take this opportunity to announce a cooperative endeavor by Wright State University and MENSA which will encourage research on the intellectually gifted by awarded two prizes of $2,000 each for completed dissertations or research projects deemed by the selection committee to make an exceptional contribution to knowledge about gifted individuals and their families. I will be pleased to supply information to those interested.

It has been too long that we have not recognized the psychological needs of gifted and talented individuals. Please help preserve the promise of our gifted children. Help them sort out how a person in the upper 3% intellectually can learn to live contentedly in a world that really is designed primarily for the other 97%, where mediocrity and conformity seem to reign supreme, where others around seem to be in slow motion, and where giftedness is often not valued - and indeed where it becomes a burden rather than an asset. Too often, in the face of this, our gifted and talented choose to camoflauge or deny their intellect, or withdraw into narrow existences, or even choose to no longer live in "the Ice Age" and take their own lives.

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